60p

THE Unexplained

MYSTERIES OF MIND SPACE & TIME

Black dogs
Sinister UFO cults
Phantom hitch-hikers
Living in the past
SPR's psi search

86

THE Unexplained
MYSTERIES OF MIND SPACE & TIME

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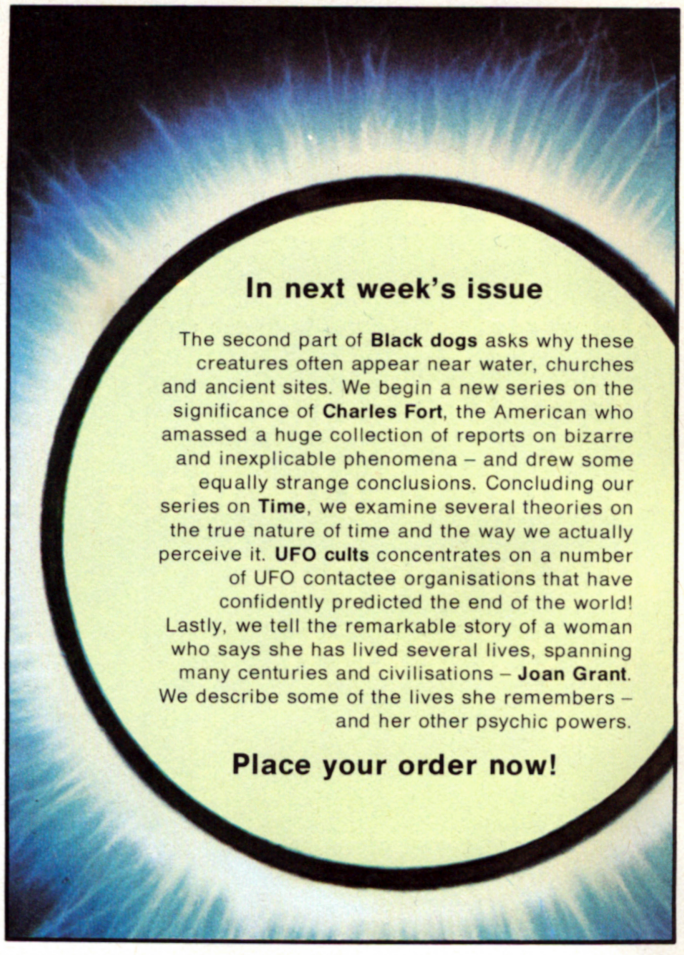

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Saviours from the stars

Will the answers to humanity's problems come from the skies? Thousands of devoted believers in UFOs think they will. KEVIN MCCLURE examines the 'flying saucer' cults and the contactees who are their prophets

OPINIONS ON THE true nature of UFOs vary widely, from the theory that they are as yet unexplained natural phenomena to the belief that they are illusions conjured up by demons to seduce mankind away from Christianity. If we bear in mind that such varying conclusions are all said to have been drawn from the same evidence and that such evidence is notoriously unreliable, then it appears that evidence and reason play a less important role in UFO belief than faith.

When faced with the unknown, the frightening, or the inexplicable, mankind tends to try to make it into a part of his religion: worships it, or damns it. UFO experience is no exception. Erich von Däniken believes that our religious history is actually one of UFO visitation and its misinterpretation. Arthur Shuttlewood, the chronicler of the mysterious events at Warminster in southern England (see page 1627), believes that some UFOs are 'the giants of past ages in modern guise, ever reminding us that mankind faces many challenges before he completes his final life-cycle at the very hub of our wonder-filled universe'. Lord Clancarty, who writes under the name Brinsley le Poer Trench, believes in the 'Sky People', who left Earth after the sinking of Atlantis, and who are occupied now in helping us raise ourselves to a better state of life in the next millennium. There may well be a common source and stimulus for reported UFO, spiritist, ghostly and religious events, and this source is likely to be identified one day, with a resulting dramatic effect upon the world's beliefs and religious philosophies. But one can no more prove that one is right in these suspicions than can von Däniken, Shuttlewood or Trench. It is all assumption, guesswork, and a certain amount of faith or wishful thinking.

This type of belief about UFOs, while not capable of proof, seems justifiable and necessary; without it there would be little experimentation, few advances in understanding. So long as the believers remain

Members of the Aetherius Society charge a 'prayer battery' with spiritual energy on Wimbledon Common in London. They believe that the energy, when released under the direction of the Interplanetary Parliament, can assist troubled parts of the globe to struggle against spiritual danger

flexible and open-minded, there is no harm to come of it. But there is another form of UFO belief for which there is much less to be said, where reason seems to be wholly suspended, and where detailed and inflexible beliefs about UFOs – their origin, nature, occupants, and purpose – become an overwhelming form of religious faith or personal philosophy and outlook. The belief itself becomes a preoccupation, and a justification for all sorts of actions.

Such beliefs take a variety of forms. Some groups see ufonauts as seeking to co-operate with certain chosen individuals on the Earth, for the improvement or continuation of the quality of our life here. According to the teachings of such groups, the UFO people do not wish or promise to take their followers away. Two American 'contactee cults' are quite typical of many others.

The One World Family, founded by Allen-Michael Noonan, is a California-based cult that has attracted some following. Many of its features recur in numerous other groups. In Noonan's case, it is said that he was working on a billboard when he was suddenly transported to another planet. He found himself surrounded by angelic creatures, seated around a fluorescent throne. A voice boomed: 'Will you agree to be the Saviour of the world?' Noonan agreed. He has since remained in contact with an extra-terrestrial known as Ashtar, has made trips to an inhabited Venus, and regards himself as the Messiah. He is writing a massive reinterpretation of the Bible, the 'Everlasting Gospel', which his followers help him produce. He believes that he is the only mouthpiece for communications from Ashtar. Hallucinogenic drugs and the exercise of psychic abilities feature in the cult.

Above: this flying disc was filmed by Daniel W. Fry (right) in Oregon, USA, in 1954. As a result of his many alleged contacts with space people, Fry works to enlighten mankind through an organisation called Understanding, Inc.

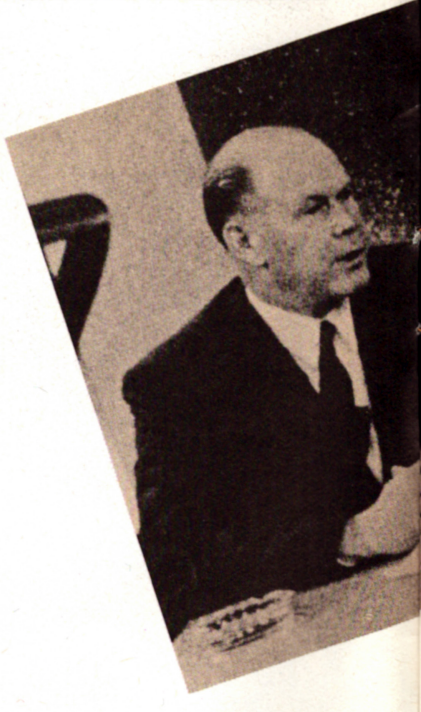
Above right: one of the earliest contactees, George Adamski, met a Venusian in 1952 and was subsequently instructed in the Cosmic Philosophy

A new Messiah

Noonan also claims that, with the practical help of the aliens, the One World Family will eventually take over the government of the USA and the running of the United Nations; but only after all professing Christians have been, as they ambiguously phrase it, 'eliminated'. Allen-Michael Noonan is one of the least wholesome characters to have founded a UFO cult and it is impossible to tell whether or not he believes his own claims. But there is no doubt that his followers believe in both the claims and the individual, and try to act accordingly.

A less sinister, but none the less remarkable, cult group was the Institute for Cosmic Research, founded in Michigan, USA, in 1967 by a young man known as 'Gordon'. This group was developed around the supposed construction of a flying saucer that would actually fly – the *Bluebird* – and the group lasted as long as its members had faith in the unique achievement that would climax its slow and painstaking creation. Gordon claimed that his birth was supernatural: he arrived in his mother's arms, clad in white muslin, while a UFO hovered over the house. He was, he said, one of the seven Great White Brothers (a common type of claim in pseudo-Eastern movements). He also affirmed that he, and he alone, was in contact with extra-terrestrial entities from Io, one of the moons of Jupiter. There, he said, he had represented Earth at meetings of the 'Intergalactic Council'.

He told his followers that the Space Brothers had warned him that 'Earth's vortex is about to break because of an excess amount of hatred on this planet.' However, the Space Brothers had a plan: in order to change the ways of mankind they had chosen 'to provide Gordon with the technology to build a small flying saucer.' Potential members of the institute were told that only highly developed souls could be involved in work on it. They were to build the saucer and fly it into the skies. They would be joined by saucers from other planets and together would circle Earth for three days, darkening the sky. People would look up and wonder

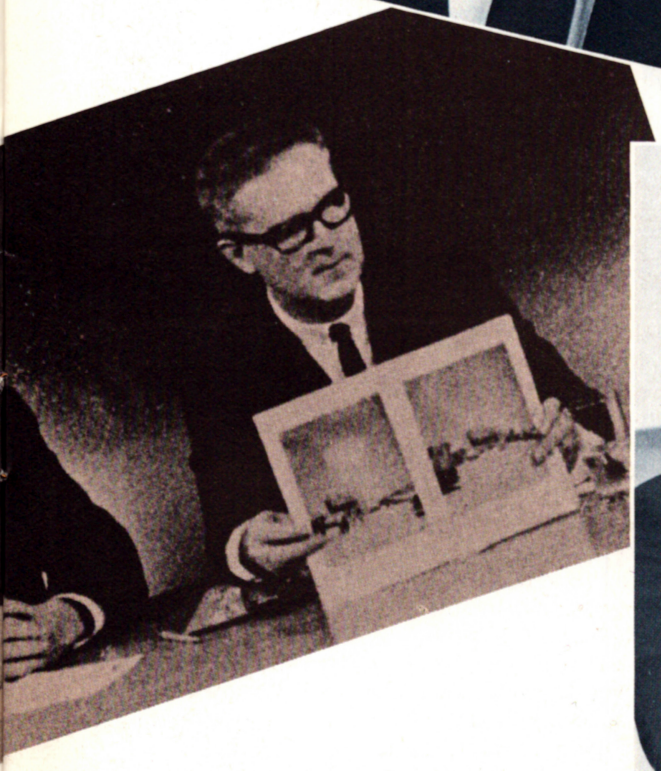


why – and then would fall on their knees and start practising 'universal law'.

In Gordon's cosmology, the Sun was cold, and the stars, all of them, were inhabited planets. Despite all this, which surely must have been hard to believe, it is clear that Gordon had considerable charisma. The group lasted seven years before the basic untruth of the claims dawned on his adherents. Even then, many of the group members were unwilling to accept the fact. It is desperately hard to admit that you have been *so* wrong, for *so* long. The group had expended time, money, energy and faith: in some ways it was easier to go on believing than to have to cope with reality.

The great majority of UFO contactee cults come from the USA and British ufology is largely free of such extreme beliefs. But the most famous and long-lived contactee cult of all was started in Britain in about 1955. The Aetherius Society, which now has its headquarters in the London suburb of Fulham, has established itself in several of the world's major cities and has members in over 40 countries. Hundreds of devoted members attend the society's activities in Britain and the USA.

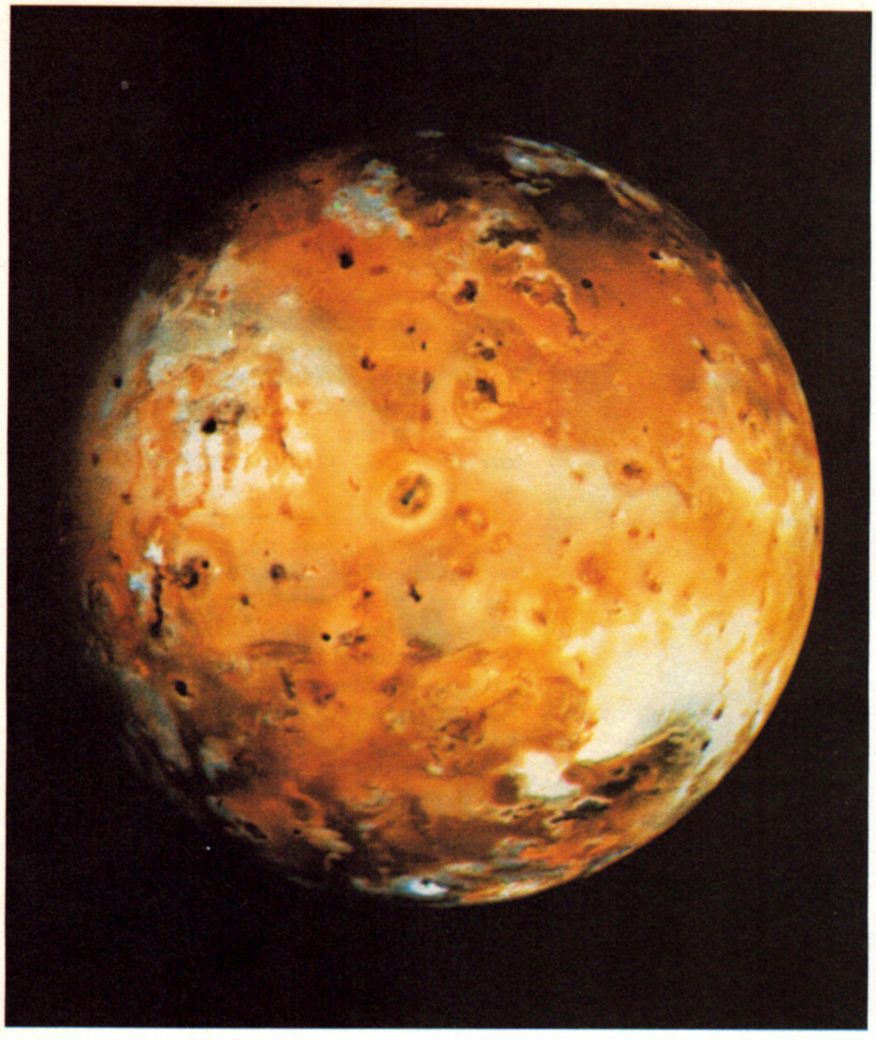
The story of the Aetherius Society and its development is very much that of its founder, George King. He built the society from nothing and now is held in the highest esteem by its members. It is worth considering, in a field where cults and belief groups are mostly transient and ephemeral, why the Aetherius Society has achieved a relatively wide appeal and has lasted so long. The key elements of the society's doctrine are very similar to those of the One World Family and the Institute for Cosmic Research. It offered its adherents a cosmology that was then beyond scientific disproof. (It asserted that most of the solar system was inhabited.) It provided an explanation for a mystery that held a widespread fascination: the flying saucers being seen all over the world. Many of them, it was said, represented a benign and concerned force – the Interplanetary Parliament. The doctrine imposed a task on the society's members: to store up, in conjunction with the extra-terrestrial entities, 'spiritual energy' in 'spiritual batteries'



Above left: Allen Noonan, founder of the One World Family, based in California. He receives communications from an extra-terrestrial called Ashtar and regards himself as the Messiah

Left: Frank E. Stranges, president of International Evangelism Crusades, Inc., received guidance from a Venusian called Val Thor, who had come to 'help mankind return to the Lord'

Far left: a well-known New York broadcaster, Long John Nebel (holding photographs), with George W. van Tassel, who founded the Ministry of Universal Wisdom to pass on teachings gleaned from regular UFO contacts



located in high places all over the world. This energy could then be discharged to prevent hardship, disease and disaster around the world. Lastly, the society possessed a priest: a go-between or communicator who alone had the ear of the Interplanetary Parliament, who would pass on the messages of the extra-terrestrials, and in turn would represent his followers to the mightier powers beyond. That communicator was, of course, George King.

The roots of the Aetherius Society lie in King's fascination, prior to 1954, with yoga and Eastern philosophy and metaphysics. His early life is not well-known, but he was born in Shropshire in 1919 and at various times worked as a fire service employee and a hire-car driver, and ran a healing sanctuary.

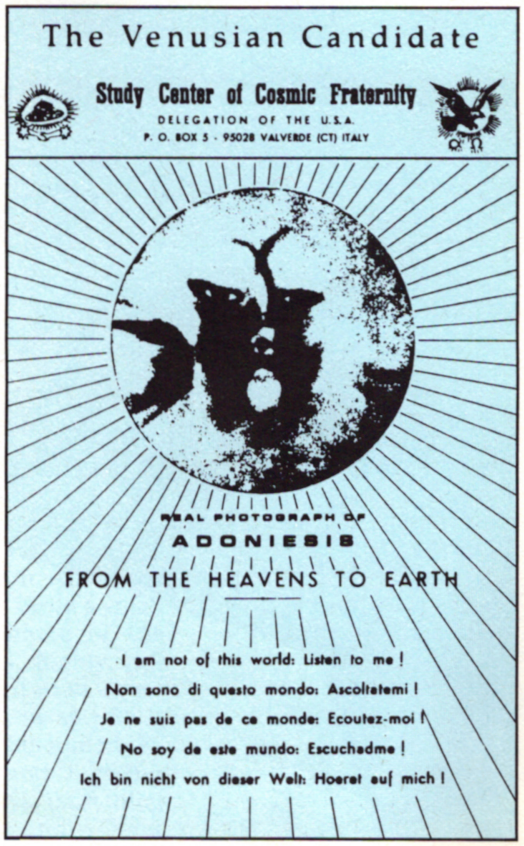
The publicity material has it that one day in May 1954, when King was alone in his flat in west London, he heard a voice say: 'Prepare yourself! You are to become the voice of Interplanetary Parliament.' Eight days later 'an Indian Swami of world renown [who] had obviously walked straight through' the locked door gave him information and instruction that dramatically changed his life and led to the founding of the society. In *You are responsible* King, not known for his humility, explains that he had to forsake his metaphysical studies, even though

> we believed that we were on the verge of discovering a new method of cancer treatment which could cure certain forms of this malignant scourge. Nevertheless, this command came out of the blue in such a way that no receiver could do anything else but listen and obey . . . . Quite soon after the deliverance of the Command, I was able to tune in and receive, telepathically, information which was relayed over millions of miles of etheric space. A message from Venus was recorded on our tape recorder. . . .

To be a little sceptical, it might have been better for the world if George King had persisted with his work on cancer, for much of the information he said he had received and the experiences he claimed to have had, implausible enough at the time, have since been rendered utterly absurd by the discoveries of space exploration. King wrote of his travels to Venus and Mars, and stated that Mercury was the only uninhabited planet. He detailed a battle he fought on a massive flying saucer of an interplanetary space fleet, 40 million miles (64 million kilometres) from Earth. In public meetings he gave trance messages from entities such as Mars Sector 6, the Master Aetherius and even the Master Jesus, who was apparently living on or near Venus. Without this last claim, the society might have been taken a little more seriously.

However, in spite of the utter lack of verifiable evidence for any of King's claims,

Above: Jupiter's innermost moon, Io. According to one 'Gordon', who founded the Institute for Cosmic Research in 1967, this world, slightly larger than our Moon, was the meeting place of the Intergalactic Council. If so, they chose a singularly inhospitable place. Space probes have discovered a world in violent turmoil, coloured reddish by sulphur spewed out by volcanoes larger than any on Earth



Right: publicity material of an Italian UFO contactee group, with a photograph allegedly showing their extra-terrestrial master. In 1976 this group wrote to US President Jimmy Carter, whose UFO sighting of a few years earlier had been widely reported. They told him that the authority he enjoyed had been 'granted from above'

his meetings grew larger. A regular journal, the *Cosmic Voice*, was launched soon after the society's inception. The messages relayed by King in an apparent trance state were taken seriously and acted upon though, like this example from Mars Sector 6, they were not always very clear: 'Take those M-ions inside of yourself, then your brain cells will release an opposite female magnetic energy. This will counteract the hurricane-force.'

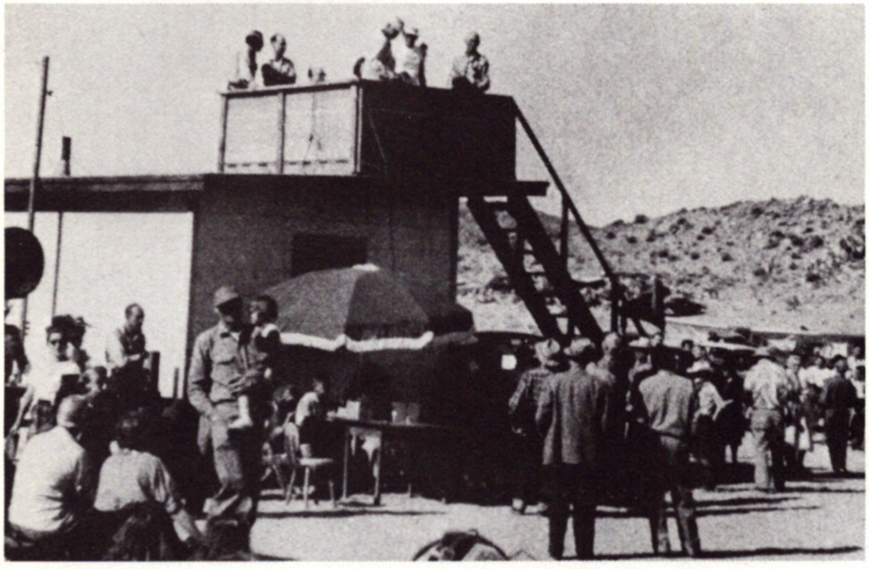
That the society still thrives may seem surprising, but members, who seem often to be selfless and determined, concentrate much of their efforts on the 'task' previously mentioned. They have made pilgrimages, often in difficult and dangerous conditions, to a number of the world's mountains to fulfil the aims of plans bearing such names as Operation Sunbeam, Operation Bluewater and Operation Starlight. They have charged the spiritual energy batteries in such places as Ben Macdhui in Scotland, Mount Kilimanjaro in Tanzania and the Madrigerfluh in Switzerland. On the night of 27 June 1981, for instance, batteries E-1 and E-3 were charged at Holdstone Down, in south-west England. The 160 members of the society who were present stored a total of 219 hours and 28 minutes of prayer energy in battery E-1. Meanwhile, the extra-terrestrials put 1100 hours into battery E-3. On the same weekend, as part of Operation Sunbeam, 6000 prayer hours of energy were sent from Jupiter to the Psychic Centre in Scotland.

It is easy to make fun of such behaviour. But if there is any element of truth in what the society believes, then its members deserve credit for their selfless efforts. In a recent *Cosmic Voice* it was reported that a discharge under Operation Prayer Power was sent to Poland on 23 April 1981. It was intended to help prevent a Russian invasion.

The mechanics of the discharge were complex. The Los Angeles battery had to be substituted for the inadequate Detroit one because: 'the Prayer Energies were not being picked up by Adepts 002 and 003 [extra-terrestrials] in position in their (invisible) Space Craft above the central base of operations in Los Angeles.' George King reported during the operation that 'the Great White Brotherhood Retreat in Kilimanjaro, East Africa, had now joined in the release pattern.' At the end of the operation, Mars Sector 6 informed King that 'there was a heavy resonance of Spiritual Energies over the whole of Poland.' Perhaps the society is mistaken in trying to explain the mechanics of how prayer works. Older, possibly wiser, faiths keep the whole matter as vague and obscure as they can.

Though good will and a sense of common purpose hold the Aetherius Society together, one feature seems sure to limit severely the number of those who take it seriously. From being plain George King in 1954, the leader of the Aetherius Society had by the end of 1981 become the holder of such titles as Knight Commander, Doctor of Philosophy, Doctor of Divinity, Doctor of Sacred Humanities, Metropolitan Archbishop of the Aetherius Churches and Count de Florina. Some of these titles are conferred by the Aetherius Society, others are awarded by what are said to be ancient chivalric orders. Similarly, the society is deep in Knights, Ladies, Reverends and Doctors. Even this, the most respectable of the UFO cults, seems unable to understand what impression such excesses make on outsiders.

On page 1726: the UFO groups that wait for the end of the world



Below: George W. van Tassel, himself in regular contact with space beings, played host to UFO enthusiasts and other contactees at his Giant Rock Space Conventions, where participants watched for signals from UFOs – and sometimes saw them

Bottom: Mount Kilimanjaro, in East Africa, is a site of 'prayer energy' – thanks to the efforts of the Aetherius Society

Taken for a ride?

The story of the hitch-hiker who unaccountably vanishes before he reaches his destination is told throughout the world. Many people have been led to conclude that the tale is merely a piece of modern folklore – but, argues MICHAEL GOSS, the story has hidden depths

ROY FULTON met the phantom hitch-hiker on a fog-streaked Friday evening in October 1979. Stopping close to the small Bedfordshire village of Stanbridge on his way home from a darts match, the 26-year-old carpet fitter had no reason to suppose the figure at the roadside, thumb upraised in customary hitchers' manner, was anything other than human; true, the pale young man in the white shirt and dark trousers was uncommunicative, merely pointing wordlessly towards Dunstable when asked where he wanted to go, but Mr Fulton knew from experience that some hitch-hikers are like that. Besides, it crossed his mind that the stranger might be a deaf mute.

They had been travelling at a steady 40 miles per hour (65 km/h) for several minutes when Mr Fulton decided it was time to break the ice:

> I turned round to offer him a cigarette and the bloke had disappeared. I braked, had a quick look in the back to see if he was there. He *wasn't* and I just gripped the wheel and drove like hell.

Not long afterwards, local police were hearing Roy Fulton's extraordinary story of a hitch-hiker who vanished from a moving vehicle. They formed the opinion that Fulton was reliable, 'an ordinary sort of chap' and not the worse for alcohol – he had drunk only a couple of lagers during the darts match – but they also felt there was little they could do about disappearing passengers, and the case was never properly explained. Anne Court, a journalist from the *Dunstable Gazette* who interviewed Fulton a couple of days later, also found him quite credible. And as late as March 1980 Roy Fulton was still insisting that he had given a ride to a phantom hitch-hiker.

Evidently representatives of police and press were favourably impressed with Roy Fulton as a witness, but does their evaluation mean that we should accept the account as fact? Many parapsychologists would argue that it does not; the story is totally uncorroborated by any kind of independent testimony and rests purely on the word of a single person. Even if they grant that the Stanbridge encounter is not a downright fabrication, psychical researchers jib at accepting

Left: Roy Fulton who, one evening in October 1979, stopped on a minor road in Bedfordshire, England, to give a lift to a lone hitch-hiker. They had driven some way when Fulton turned to speak to the hitch-hiker – and found he had completely disappeared. Fulton was later interviewed by the police, who regarded his testimony as reliable; Anne Court (below), the journalist who wrote up the story for the local *Dunstable Gazette*, was also favourably impressed. Nevertheless, the question remains: was Fulton's story anything more than the reworking of an archetypal legend that has recurred, in varying forms, over many centuries?

the unsupported, subjective evidence of persons who were emotionally involved in the events they describe. With the best will in the world, such witnesses can tell the truth only as they perceive it to be – and this may not be what actually occurred.

There is an even greater objection to Roy Fulton's story. The tale of the phantom hitch-hiker is a ghostly classic, an ancient, oft-repeated piece told and retold in many localities. 'People,' declared folklorist and anthropologist Andrew Lang, who became President of the Society for Psychical Research in 1912, 'will unconsciously localise old legends in new places and assign old occurrences or fables to new persons.' In this way the tales are given new leases of life and are passed from one narrator to another across great distances.

These 'folk ghosts' are the theme of traditional supernatural stories governed by strict narrative conventions. The teller and his audience tacitly agree to suspend disbelief and pretend the tale *may* be true, the 'evidence' for its accuracy being that 'it happened to a friend of a friend' of the narrator. But it does not stand up to cross-examination. If a researcher demands names of witnesses, for example, it usually proves that, like the ghost of the story, these personages have a talent for disappearing without trace. There is nothing for the investigator to check up on, and the account is reduced to hearsay.

Few ghost stories are as well-travelled as that of the phantom hitch-hiker. The tale is told in Korea, Canada, Malaysia, Sweden, Sicily, Pakistan and South Africa; local specimens occur in most English counties. Of course, details as to age, sex and physical appearance of the hitch-hiker fluctuate, as do the number of witnesses and the type of vehicle in which he or she hitches a ride – a car, a taxi, a motorcycle, a bus, a horsedrawn wagon or carriage and, in one Malayan version, a trishaw. In the most commonly heard form, the hitch-hiker is a young female who, before vanishing inexplicably, gives the driver an address at which he subsequently calls, learning to his horror that the girl has been dead for days, months or years. None of this corroboration took place after the event at Stanbridge, however. The entire episode lacks the artificially neat conclusion and dramatic touches generally found in folklore phantom hitch-hiker stories.

Cultural beliefs can affect how the phantom hitch-hiker is interpreted. In Britain he or she is habitually regarded as the spirit of a dead person, frequently the victim of a tragic road accident, but elsewhere the phantom hitch-hiker is viewed as a prophet, demon, goddess, witch or fairy. For instance, in Hawaii the phantom hitch-hiker is associated with Pele, a basket-carrying old woman who is tutelary goddess of the volcano Mauna Loa. Malaysia has the *langsuyar*, a vampire-like entity that takes the form of an attractive woman and waits on lonely stretches of road; after a brief time in the car, the hitcher flies into the air uttering blood-curdling cries. The basic motif of a vanishing, supernatural, hitch-hiker adapts itself to the cultural assumptions and needs of whatever society it is told in, something that helps to explain its long-standing popularity.

Prophets of doom

Nowhere is the phantom hitch-hiker story more often told than in the USA. There is hardly a state in which the tale is unknown, from the Mexican border up to Alaska or from New York out to California, where it has established itself as one of the most persistent of ghost stories. This ubiquity was confirmed by the folklorists Richard K.

Left: a carved figure said to represent Pele, the divine guardian of Mauna Loa, Hawaii, the largest volcano in the world. In Hawaii, Pele becomes the subject of the phantom hitch-hiker story: she utters a warning about a forthcoming eruption of the volcano before disappearing

Right: *langsuyar* – Malayan vampires who stalk lonely stretches of road in the guise of attractive women. After hitching a lift, they spend only a brief time in the car before flying off into the air uttering blood-curdling shrieks

Beardsley and Rosalie Hankey during compilation of two exhaustive papers entitled 'The vanishing hitch-hiker', published in the *California Folklore Quarterly* for October 1942 and January 1943. They identified four main treatments of the motif: besides the dominant address-giving girl ghost and Hawaii's Pele, there were narratives in which the phantom hitch-hiker – sometimes a nun, and almost always an old woman – delivers a prophecy, which is not infrequently of a catastrophe. The other variant is theatrical: a girl is encountered in a dance hall or bar and borrows from the driver an item of clothing that he later finds on her grave.

Later other American folklorists took up the chase, adding innumerable other phantom hitch-hikers to the original 79 featured in Beardsley and Hankey's sample. By the 1970s, there was emerging a discernible trend towards the 'prophetic' phantom hitch-hiker variant; at the same time it was apparent that widely different cultural groups in the USA were adapting the phantom hitch-hiker story as a new vehicle for their religious or cultural doctrines. Thus the ghost was identified sometimes as one of the Three Nephites of Mormon lore, sometimes as a prophet of Christ's second coming (or as Christ himself), and sometimes – according to American parapsychologist D. Scott Rogo – as a Moonie, a member of the Unification Church.

The cumulative impact of these folklore studies suggests that the phantom hitch-hiker is a creation of repeated story-telling, a piece of fiction. But Andrew Lang once pointed out that identical ghost stories occurring in widely separated locations are not necessarily the results of diffusion. Patterns, like poltergeist stone-throwings, he said, were reported in all ages and cultures, *not* because they were relocated tales but because 'events repeat themselves'. They are evidence of a phenomenon that behaves in the same way, at any place and at any time. No one could seriously contend that the majority of phantom hitch-hiker tales are not folk fiction – but can the small remainder be seen as a recurring pattern of this kind?

Top: a stretch of road near Uniondale, South Africa, from which phantom hitch-hiker stories have been reported on four separate occasions. Corporal Dawie van Jaarsfeld (above) said that he travelled for 10 miles (16 kilometres) one day in April 1978 with a girl hitch-hiker riding pillion on his motorcycle – and then turned to find her suddenly gone

Roy Fulton claimed that his story was a real experience. Newspapers, which are supposed to report real-life events, have carried similar phantom hitch-hiker tales and, while one may be inclined to take media coverage of the paranormal with a pinch of salt, it is still worth pondering whether *all* phantom hitch-hikers are only updated folk motifs given a species of respectability in print.

Occasionally, research into the background of a well-publicised phantom hitch-hiker reveals that a core of fact may lie at the heart of what sounds an unlikely and hackneyed story. Manifestations of the Uniondale phantom hitch-hiker in South Africa have been reported on four occasions, all associated with Maria Roux, who died at the age of 23 in a car crash on 12 April 1968. Admittedly, two of these alleged sightings are of a vague, unsatisfactory kind, and the remaining two are subject to contradictions

Near the knuckle

One of the more macabre folk stories of the 20th century concerns a driver who *fails* to stop for a hitch-hiker. Usually introduced with the words 'Did I tell you what happened to my friend – well, it was his cousin actually . . .', it goes like this:

A motorist is driving down a country road when he sees a lone young man thumbing a lift. As he slows down to pick him up, he is dismayed to see two or three of the hiker's companions emerge from behind bushes or trees at the side of the road.

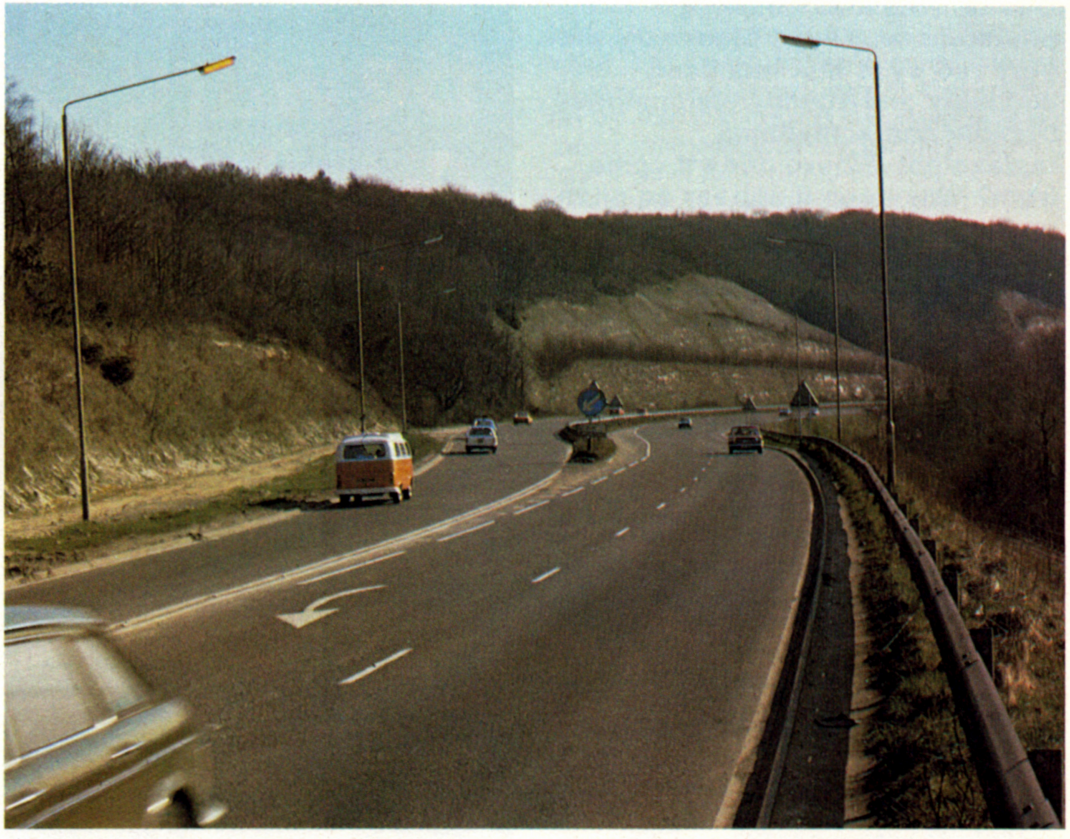
Perhaps feeling that his generosity is being taken advantage of, or perhaps alarmed that he is about to be set on by a gang, the driver decides not to offer them a lift after all. Now with the car almost at a stop, he doesn't like the look of the hitch-hikers in any case.

They're standing rather close to the car, but the driver steps on the accelerator and pulls away as quickly as he can. The would-be hitch-hikers seem angry – they are shouting and yelling as he drives off.

Relieved at his narrow escape, he carries along the road for some miles. Then he sees that fuel is running low, and soon stops at a service station to fill up.

The next thing he knows is that the pump attendant, white as a sheet, is reeling back in horror from the car. The driver leaps out of the car to see what is wrong – and freezes to the spot, appalled at what he sees.

Stuck in one of the door handles are four human fingers.



Blue Bell Hill, on the road between Chatham and Maidstone in Kent – the site of yet another phantom hitch-hiker story. Here the hitch-hiker is associated with the spirit of a young girl who was killed at the foot of Blue Bell Hill on the eve of her wedding in November 1965

in the retelling. Yet, when writing up the results of her researches in the July 1979 issue of *Fate* magazine, Cynthia Hind could not rule out the possibility that phantom incidents *had* occurred more or less as stated and (perhaps more remarkable) that there was evidence to support the view that drivers had encountered the dead girl's apparition.

Analogous with the Uniondale tale is Britain's most famous phantom hitch-hiker story, set on Blue Bell Hill between Maidstone and Chatham in Kent. There is little hard evidence for a psychical researcher to follow up; witnesses' names are absent, dates left obscure and other important details unavailable. Yet the wealth of anecdotes from this area, only a fraction of which have appeared in print, are assigned with monotonous regularity to the spirit of a bride-to-be, who was killed in a car crash on the eve of her wedding at the foot of Blue Bell Hill back in November 1965. This accident, like the Uniondale fatality, is an historical fact, but in other phantom hitch-hiker tales the connection between the hitch-hiker and a death on the road on which the phantom appears is no more than conjectural. People are prone to think ghosts must be the products of tragedies – and, as the phantom hitch-hiker is popularly assumed to be a ghost, there is a strong temptation to hunt for likely accidents to account for it.

Left: Mount St Helens erupts on 18 May 1980. After the event, motorists began to come forward with stories of an old woman to whom they had given lifts – and who had prophesied the eruption

It is, of course, possible that the phantom hitch-hiker is not always a lie, a folk tale or a 'spirit'. In searching for alternative hypotheses, it is as well to remember that similar stories by far antedate the automobile age. Other reliable evidence tends to suggest that this antiquated motif is still important to us. In the wake of the eruption of Mount St Helens on 18 May 1980, stories began to circulate of an old woman, sometimes described as a nun, who had prophesied this and other events to Washington and Oregon motorists who gave her lifts. It is just possible that the phantom hitch-hiker story is a variation of the ancient myth of the mysterious stranger who comes to warn mankind of impending danger – a myth that also lives on in the stories of people who have allegedly made contact with aliens.

Beware of the dog

One of Britain's commonest phantoms is a huge black dog with fiery red eyes that manifests suddenly and silently – sometimes friendly and sometimes malevolent. Where does it come from? Why does it appear so often and act so differently at different times? SIMON INNES looks for the answers to the black dog enigma

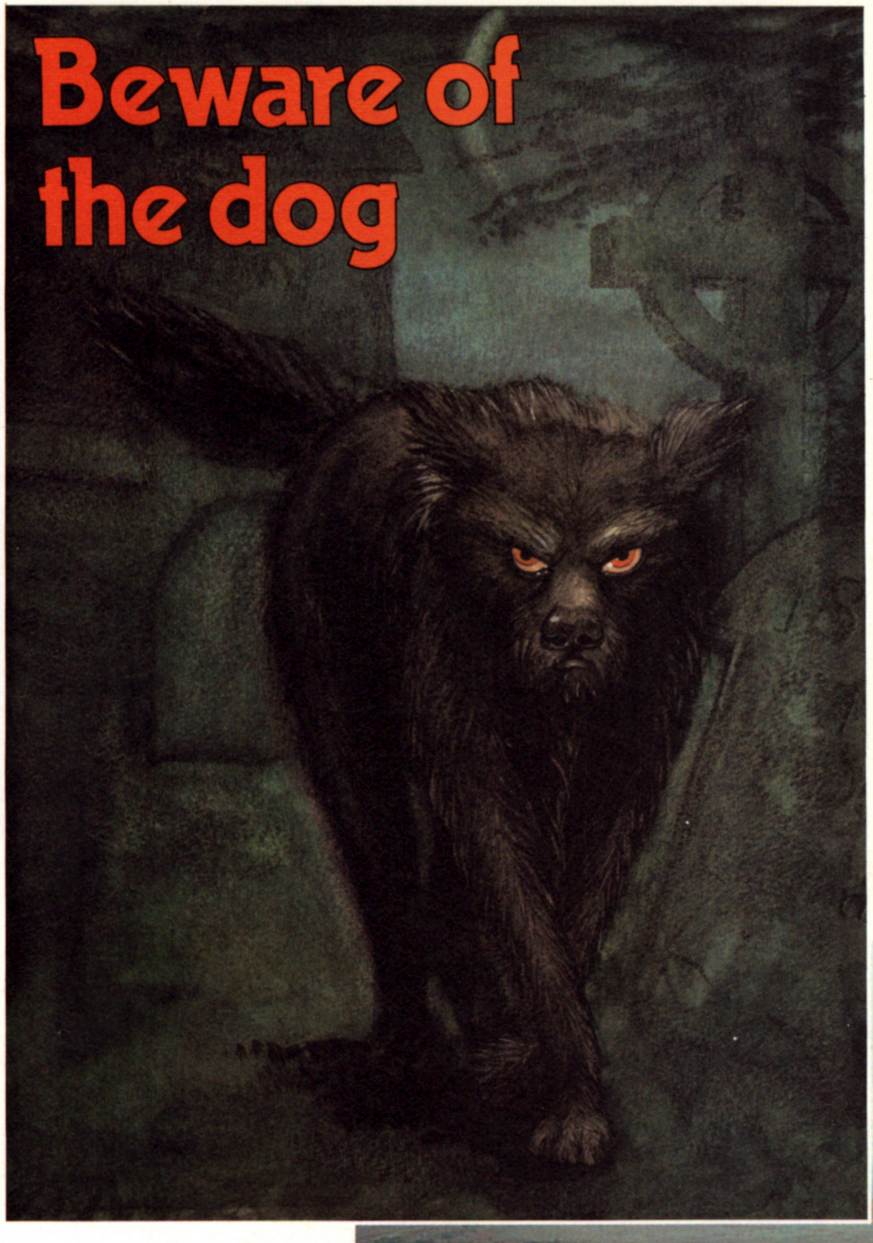
IN THE EARLY HOURS of a winter morning in 1972, at a secluded farmhouse on the southern edge of Dartmoor, a farmer and his wife were woken by strange scratching noises outside their bedroom door. The farmer decided to investigate. He climbed from his bed and, brandishing an iron poker, looked out into the gloom of the unlit corridor. At first he could see little that was out of the ordinary, and he walked along the passage towards the top of the stairwell. '. . . then suddenly I could see a large shadow at the top of the stairs. For some reason I assumed it was a dog and was about to turf it out of the house when it suddenly moved towards me, its eyes glowing a fiery red. I was so shocked, I don't really know why, that I just struck out at it.'

As he struck at the shadowy creature in front of him, a brilliant burst of light flashed, followed by the crash of breaking glass – and the mysterious dog vanished altogether. After a few moments the farmer's wife joined him and together they searched the rest of the house. They discovered three things: there had been a complete electrical failure in the house, every window was broken, and the outside yard was covered with broken roofing tiles. The farmer and his wife spent a somewhat sleepless night.

Inexplicable devastation

Further investigation the following day revealed that the roof of the house had been severely damaged, and so had the roofs of many of the barns and outhouses. So what was it that caused such devastation to an isolated Devon farmhouse? From the farmer's account of the facts, it would seem that the explanation lay in the actions of a phantom black dog. There is hardly a county in Britain that has not had a black dog sighting. Indeed, encounters with black dogs are far from a rare occurrence in many areas. In East Anglia the sightings have been so regular that the phantom dog is known as Black Shuck there. In Lancashire it is called the Trash or Skriker. Perhaps this consistency in reported sightings is the most intriguing aspect of the whole black dog enigma.

The dog is almost always of larger size than average with a shaggy coat and red eyes often glowing like hot coals. (The eyes are the most notable feature.) It generally appears and disappears silently, and the encounter



Above: the phantom black dog looks very real to those who see it – and there is wide agreement that it is larger than average, with shaggy coat and glowing red eyes

Right: the bleak, lightly populated and wild Dartmoor in Devon. In 1972 a farmer living near its southern edge had an encounter with a destructive black dog

with it is usually very short.

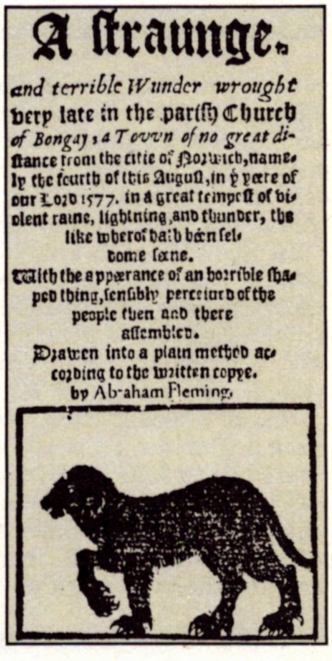
Most reports of the black dog agree as to what the phantom looks like. But the behaviour of the creature varies so much from occasion to occasion that the significance of an encounter is difficult to determine. We have seen the dog as threatening and destructive. In many cases, however, it has been recorded as playing a guardian role, protecting lonely or lost travellers. Such was the experience of a workman travelling home from Taunton in Somerset one misty night. Having lost his way, he was suddenly joined by a large black dog that had mysteriously appeared a few yards in front of him. The workman decided that the dog would make as good a guide as any, and he followed the animal. It always remained in full view a few paces ahead of him. After they had covered some distance, the dog disappeared as suddenly as it had appeared, leaving the man standing alone. Only when he had recovered from the shock of the dog's vanishing trick did he realise that he was only some 20 yards (18 metres) from his home. The black dog had brought him safely through the mist.

A similar experience was reported in the 1930s by a woman who had walked home from Scunthorpe to Crosby, then in Lincolnshire. Suddenly she found herself accompanied by a black dog trotting along beside her. At first the woman was a little frightened because she had neither heard nor seen the dog approach. But after a while she was pleased to have its company, especially when she saw a group of labourers coming along the road towards her. As they passed her by, they told her that it was only because she had the dog with her that they had not had 'a bit of fun' with her. No sooner were the labourers out of sight than the dog disappeared.

Like the black dog of Dartmoor, phantom dogs often behave malevolently. One such encounter took place in Suffolk, on a Sunday in 1577. During a morning service at Blythburgh church a black dog suddenly appeared in the aisle. It attacked and killed three people and, in some extraordinary way, severely burned another. Having wrought its havoc upon the congregation, it then left, leaving burn marks about the door by which it made its exit – burn marks that can still be seen today. On 4 August 1577 the dog reappeared at Bungay, some 10 miles (16 kilometres) away, again among the congregation at morning service. Once more the dog attacked the churchgoers at random.

Below: a black dog weather vane stands in the centre of Bungay, Suffolk. The vane commemorates the attack by a mysterious black dog on the church in 1577

Below right: the title page of a contemporary report on the mysterious visitation at Bungay. It is described as 'A strange and terrible wunder' that involved 'an horrible shaped thing'


A ſtraunge.

and terrible Wunder wrought very late in the parish Church of Bongay, a Towne of no great distance from the citie of Norwich, namely the fourth of this Auguſt, in ỳ yere of our Lord 1577. in a great tempeſt of violent raine, lightning, and thunder, the like wherof hath bẽn ſeldome ſeene.

With the appærance of an horrible ſhaped thing, ſenſibly perceiued of the people then and there aſſembled.

Dzawen into a plain method according to the written copye.

by Abraham Fleming.

The earliest record of a black dog sighting comes from France in an account by Bertin in the *Annales Francorum regum*, written in AD 856. The incident occurred during a service in a small village church. About halfway through the service, the church was suddenly cast into darkness and all attention was drawn towards a large black dog that had mysteriously appeared. With its eyes burning fiercely, the animal ran to and fro around the altar as though looking for someone. Then, as suddenly as it had appeared, it disappeared without trace.

The black dog must have crossed the Channel permanently because the overwhelming majority of recorded encounters has been in Britain. This has led to general acceptance that phantom black dogs are

Left: Faust, in the account of this legendary figure by the famous German writer Goethe, encounters a black dog in his study. There are other examples of black dog sightings in Europe, but most seem to occur in the British Isles

peculiar to the British Isles. This tall, shaggy, black creature with blazing red eyes has been written about for centuries up to the present. Yet nobody has been able to establish its significance. Why do black dogs appear and what do they mean?

In many English counties, the popular belief is that Black Shuck is a harbinger of death – usually of the percipient or of his or her close relative. A good illustration of why this belief persists comes from the Isle of Man. In 1927 a friend of Walter Gill, a writer on Manx subjects, encountered a phantom black dog on a road near Ramsey. The dog refused to let him pass, standing its ground and looking straight at him with eyes that appeared to be 'as burning coals'. After staring in this eerie manner for some seconds, the dog at last moved aside to let him pass. Shortly after this strange meeting, the father of the man died. Black Shuck had brought the message.

Usually the black dog will appear briefly before peacefully and quietly vanishing, often even disregarding a person's presence. Two stories – one from the 19th and one from the early 20th century – show that it is generally a good idea to ignore it in turn.

In 1893 two men driving their cart along a Norfolk lane were forced to rein up suddenly by a black dog standing in the middle of the path. The driver of the cart was all for driving straight at the dog but his passenger, better acquainted with the tales of Black Shuck, held him back. After some time the driver, despite the pleas of his passenger, would wait no longer and whipped up his horse. As the cart touched the dog the air seemed to grow heavy with the smell of sulphur, and the dog – its eyes burning in anger – disappeared in a ball of flame. Within a few days of this event, the driver of the cart died unexpectedly.

Right: the black dog of Newgate, in the title page illustration for a broadside concerning 'The discovery of a London monster' in 1638

Below: the sign of the Black Dog inn at Broadmayne in Dorset. The popularity of this name for country pubs and inns testifies to the hold this phantom dog has on the local imagination

The second example occurred at Aylesbury in Buckinghamshire. A farmer there liked to use a gap in the hedge as a short cut when he went to milk his cows, but found it blocked day after day by a black dog. He eventually abandoned the route because of the dog's presence. One day when the farmer had a friend with him, he decided that he would get rid of the dog for once and for all. As he approached the gap, the dog was waiting for him as usual. He took the heavy yoke that he used for carrying the milk buckets and brought it crashing down upon the dog with both hands. The dog promptly vanished – but the farmer fell to the ground unconscious. When he came to, he was completely paralysed and he remained in that state for the rest of his life.

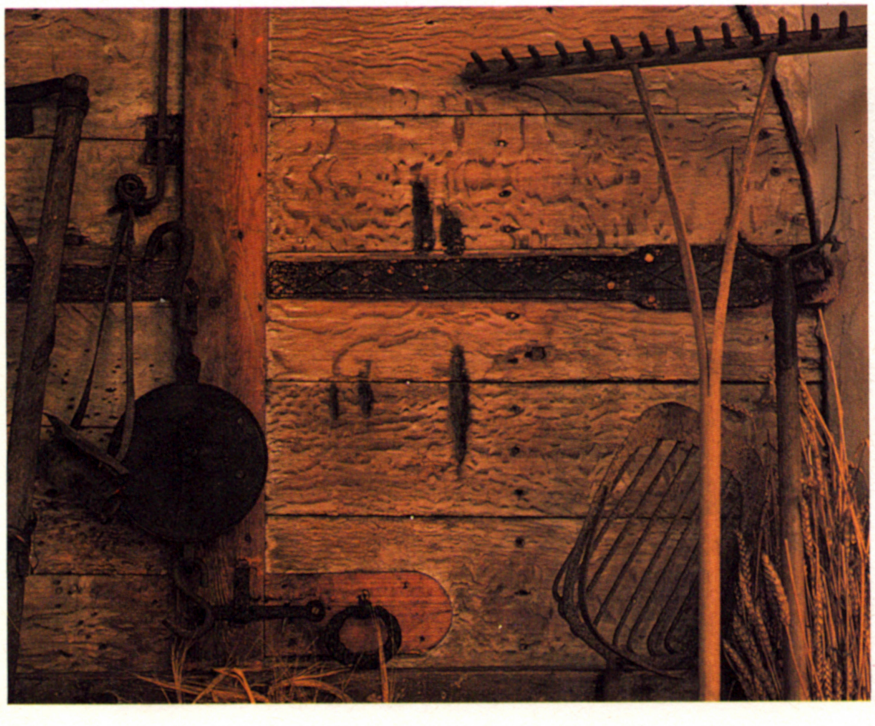
On the other hand, many people have struck at black dogs without any ill effects. There is the story of the man who was out for an evening stroll on the road between Cromer and Overstrand in Norfolk.

Suddenly he became aware of a black dog following him. Disturbed by its presence, the man slowed his pace until he felt that the dog was in reach. At that point he turned quickly and struck it with his walking stick. The walking stick passed clean through the dog. Frightened and shocked, the man ran as fast as he could in the opposite direction. There is another case of a Lincolnshire woman who, having noticed a large black dog following her, turned and struck at it with her umbrella. The umbrella, like the walking stick, passed clean through the animal. Paying no attention to such unfriendly behaviour, the phantom black dog continued to trot along beside her.

Two more stories of encounters with big black dogs illustrate the variety of behaviour they seem to display. In 1928 in County Londonderry, Northern Ireland, a young university student was fishing near his home. Suddenly he felt compelled to look downstream, where he could see clearly for 100 yards (90 metres) or more. At that moment, what appeared to be a large black dog was trotting determinedly towards him. Alone on that isolated stretch of the river, the student took fright. He threw down his fishing rod and climbed the nearest tree in order to gain height for safety. As the dog passed below the tree in which the student had taken refuge, it looked up at him with red fiery eyes and snarled, but continued on its way. The most disturbing feature of the encounter to the student was the dog's bright red eyes.

Two sites of reported black dog hauntings – the trees near the church at Algarkirk in Lincolnshire (above) and a stretch of road west of South Kelsey in the same county (left)

Below: the door of the church at Blythburgh showing the strange burn marks left after the shocking assault by a black dog in the 16th century. Blythburgh is in East Anglia where there have been so many sightings of the animal that it is known by a nickname – Black Shuck



Another modern encounter occurred on a balmy summer evening in 1938 on the Suffolk-Norfolk border a few miles from Bungay – the scene of the black dog attack in a church in 1577. A man out for an evening stroll suddenly noticed a large black dog trotting along the road towards him. It seemed to have appeared from nowhere and, as it drew level with the man, he moved aside to let it pass. Almost as soon as it had passed him, it vanished. Yet there was no possible means of exit from the lane, which was bordered by steep banks on both sides. While the encounter was by no means prolonged, the man had enough time to notice the more prominent features of the dog: that it was unusually large, that its coat was dark and very shaggy, and that its eyes were fiery red and extremely piercing.

This description seems to meet general agreement. It is also agreed that the enigmatic black dog appears and disappears silently, and while it seems to be material, it is not. But what is to be made of a creature that one moment is a harbinger of death and the next a guardian; that one moment will kill people and the next will ignore them; or that seems to show up for no particular reason?

Why do black dogs often appear near water, churches and ancient sites? See page 1730

The three ages of Man, by Lorenzo Lotto (1480–1556). Some psychical researchers have suggested that the entire course of our lives is subconsciously known to us – that, in some way, our past and future are always present

Living in the past

Timeslips into the past seem to indicate that the past really is always with us – and that it exists on a level that is accessible to psychics. ARCHIE ROY assesses the implications of this fascinating idea

THERE IS A SURPRISINGLY large body of evidence to support the view that, on certain occasions, direct access to the past is possible. The term *retrocognition* is often used to describe events in which a person experiences a past scene. This scene may have happened recently, or many centuries in the past. Sight and sound may be involved either separately or together.

It comes as a surprise to many to discover that it is at least as difficult to provide a cast-iron case for retrocognition as it is for precognition. The difficulty arises when a case of alleged retrocognition is reported and a serious attempt is made to ensure that the person who apparently viewed a past scene actually did so, and did not draw upon records such as history books, newspapers, documents, descriptions by other people, memories and so on. The person may be sincere in his assertion that he had had no prior experience of the scene. But memory is fallible. It is safe to say that many of the events of our past life have created memories that have receded into the unconscious and cannot be recaptured at will. If the hallucination mechanism that is a part of our mental make-up draws upon such memories and, for some reason, reconstructs the relevant scene, it is certainly possible that we may not realise we are actually dramatising our own experiences rather than having a genuine retrocognition.

The possibility of viewing the past obviously carries the implication that, in some way, the past is still in existence and accessible. But, however difficult that idea may be, it does not raise the difficulties caused by the idea of premonitions. There, the uncomfortable corresponding suggestion that in some way the *future* is already in existence and accessible produces painful paradoxes.

It is surely safe to say that, whereas it is not impossible to visualise the existence of a machine for viewing the past, it appears to be conceptually impossible to visualise a machine for viewing the future. Common sense tells us that the past is over and done with and cannot be changed even if observed anew; on the other hand the future is yet to be and, if we do not like what we think may happen, we are free to change it by an act of will – or, if not, then surely there is no free will.

Let us consider some of the many alleged cases of retrocognition. In his pioneering work *Human personality and its survival of bodily death*, Frederic Myers described the crystal-gazing visions of a young lady known as Miss A. She was closely associated with the Countess of Radnor, who verified a number of her alleged visions of past scenes. She was also well-known to Myers.

Describing a retrocognitive scene viewed in the crystal while she was staying at Lord

and Lady Radnor's home, Longford Castle, near Salisbury, Wiltshire, Miss A. said:

> Lady Radnor was in the room with me. I saw amongst other things a large carved fireplace with a coat of arms in the middle and curious serpents' heads. I seemed to follow this path which seemed to lead out by a river and I saw figures pass along it in old-fashioned dress. The name Edwye de Bovery was then spelt out in the crystal; and Lady Radnor said that the vision must be all wrong, as the name had never been spelt like that. The name 'White Webs' was also spelt out – a name of which I had never heard. A few days afterwards, when I was looking at some books in the library, I saw a curious old book with crests and coats of arms, drawn by hand, not printed; and in this book I found one of the coats of arms which I had seen in the crystal . . . . Lady Radnor found that it was the coat belonging to an heiress Miss Smith. A little while afterwards, in an old church register or account book or something, the name of Sir Edwye de Bovery was found.

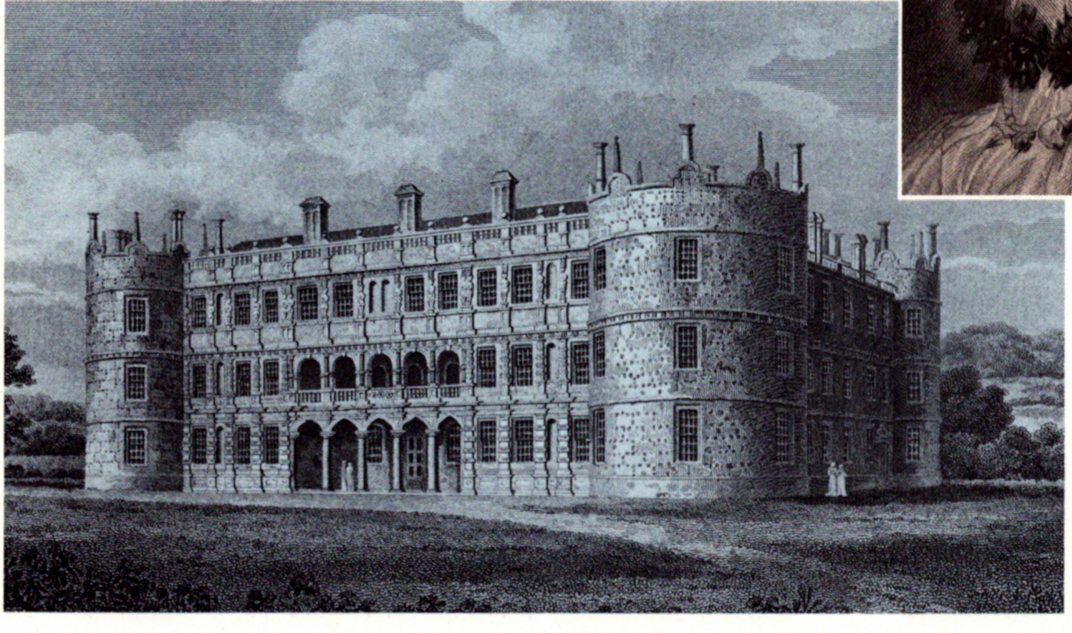
In attesting to this, Lady Radnor reported that it was in the local church register.

> Sir Edward des Bouverie, Kt., whose name I have since found spelt in old deeds de Bovery, though he signed it himself des Bouverie, lived at the Red House, Cheshunt, Herts., and died there in 1694. His son, Sir William, sold the house and lived partly at the parsonage of Cheshunt. There is a place called White Webs in that neighbourhood. Sir Edward's grandson, Edward des Bouverie, sold the property and settled at Longford in 1717. In 1718 he married Mary Smith, daughter and co-heiress of John Smith of London, one of the first Governors of the Bank of England. There were many secret passages leading to and from the Red House at Cheshunt; but I have not tried to identify the house at White Webs.

On another occasion, Miss A. had a vision in Salisbury Cathedral. She saw vast processions of gorgeously apparelled Catholic ecclesiastics with jewelled crosses carried before them. Among the dignitaries was one who came near them and gazed at them with a singularly sad expression. He said, 'I have been a great sinner. I was greatly responsible for the beheading of Anne Boleyn. What adds to the sadness of it, her father and I were boys together, and our homes were in close proximity to each other.' On being asked his name, he said: 'My name is John Longland.' On being further questioned he replied: 'Mr Barnby's music brought me here. I often hear it in Eton Chapel.'

Investigation showed that John Longland had been Dean of Salisbury in Henry VIII's reign, also that his body had been buried in Eton College chapel. This fact was not known locally because the brass that covered the tomb had been destroyed by vandals in the 17th century. Mr Barnby, whose 'music brought me here', was Sir Joseph Barnby,

Right: Lady Radnor (1820–1879) and her home, Longford Castle, near Salisbury, Wiltshire (below). It was at Longford that a certain Miss A., gazing into a crystal ball, experienced a retrocognitive vision of the house as it had been around the end of the 17th century. Astonishingly, the vision included details that were unknown to both Miss A. and the Countess, and were verified only afterwards



the well-known Victorian musician.

If we accept Miss A.'s claim that she was describing accurately the visions she saw, we have some curious facts to explain. It seems impossible to dismiss them or the other remarkable visions of the past she experienced over the years. On the one hand, it would appear that she was directly viewing people and buildings as they had been, in some cases centuries before; on the other hand the 'people' she saw actually seemed to converse with her and in some cases claimed to be still around and interested in contemporary events, for example Sir Joseph Barnby's music. It is cases like these that defy a simple clear-cut explanation, either of retrocognition of a 'dead' past or of survival.

A musical phantasm

In an incident from the United States, researchers Gardner Murphy and Herbert L. Klemme reported a case of alleged retrocognition involving Mrs Coleen Buterbaugh, a secretary at Nebraska Wesleyan University, Lincoln, USA. Mrs Buterbaugh's experience occurred on 3 October 1963 when she was asked by Dean Sam Dahl to take a message to a colleague, Professor Martin, in his office suite in the C.C. White Building nearby. As she entered the building and walked through its large hall, she heard the sounds of students in some rooms reserved for music practice. In particular, she heard the sound of a marimba being played. Entering the first room of the suite, she halted after a few steps when she experienced a strong smell – a musty, unpleasant odour. She had been walking with her eyes downcast, but now she raised them – and saw the figure of a very tall, black-haired woman in a shirt-waisted, ankle-length skirt reaching with her right arm towards the upper right-hand shelves in an old music cabinet.

Mrs Buterbaugh later described her experiences in these words:

> As I first walked into the room everything was quite normal. About four steps into the room was when the strong odor hit me. When I say strong odor, I mean the kind that simply stops you in your tracks and almost chokes you. I was looking down at the floor, as one often does when walking, and as soon as that odor stopped me I felt that there was someone in the room with me. It was then that I was aware that there were no noises out in the hall. Everything was deathly quiet. I looked up and something drew my eyes to the cabinet along the wall in the next room. I looked up and there she was. She had her back to me, reaching up into one of the shelves of the cabinet with her right hand, and standing perfectly still. She never moved. She was not transparent, and yet I knew she wasn't real. While I was looking at her she just faded away – not parts of her body one at a time, but her whole body all at once.
>
> Up until the time she faded away I was not aware of anyone else being in the suite of rooms, but just about the time of her fading out I felt as though I still was not alone. To my left was a desk and I had a feeling there was a man sitting at that desk. I turned around and saw no one, but I still felt his presence. When that feeling of his presence left I have no idea, because it was then, when I looked out the window behind that desk, that I got frightened and left the room . . . when I looked out that window there wasn't one modern thing out there. The street [Madison Street], which is less than a half block away from the building, was not even there and neither was the new Willard House. That was when I realised that these people were not in my time, but that I was back in their time.
>
> It was not until I was back out in the hall that I again heard the familiar noises. This must have all taken place in a few seconds because the girls that were going into the orientation class as I entered the room were still going in and someone was still playing the marimba.

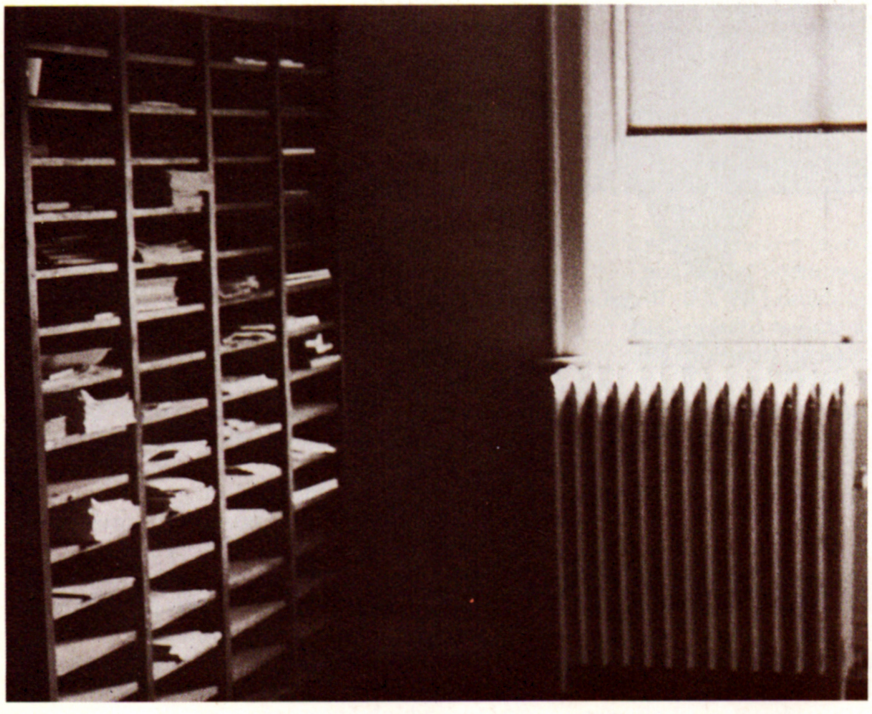
Above: the C.C. White building of Nebraska Wesleyan University, Lincoln, USA. It was here on 3 October 1963 that Mrs Coleen Buterbaugh had a spontaneous and extraordinarily vivid retrocognitive vision: walking into the music office (above right), she saw the figure of a tall woman in a long skirt and bouffant hairstyle. Research later revealed that a Miss Clarissa U. Mills, who fitted Mrs Buterbaugh's description of her vision, had died in the office in 1936

Shaken by her experience, Mrs Buterbaugh returned to her office. She tried to continue typing, but kept stopping. Finally she told Dean Dahl of the strange event. In later discussions, it was suggested that there could have been some resemblance between the tall black-haired woman Mrs Buterbaugh had seen in the office and a Miss Clarissa U. Mills, a lecturer in musical theory and piano, who had used that office many years before and who had died suddenly in 1936 in a room

just across the hall. In some old yearbooks (never before seen by Mrs Buterbaugh), a picture of Miss Mills was found. The figure had been standing with its back towards Mrs Buterbaugh so that the face was hidden, but in many particulars it resembled Miss Mills, who had been very tall, thin and black-haired. She had been interested in music and choral singing – and the filing cabinet before which the apparition had stood actually contained choral music, some of which dated back to a time before Miss Mills's death. In addition, the clothes and bushy, bouffant hairstyle of the apparition were consistent with the fashions of 1915. Miss Mills had started work at the college in 1912, and in the picture of her discovered in an old yearbook she wore just such a hairstyle.

Mrs Buterbaugh was able to describe what she saw when she looked out of the window behind the desk.

The window was open. Even though it was fairly early in the morning, it appeared as though it were a very warm, summer afternoon. It was very still. There were a few scattered trees – about two on my right and about three on my left. It seems to me there were more, but these are the only ones I can be definite about. The rest was open field; the new Willard sorority house and also Madison Street were not there. I remember seeing a very vague outline of some sort of building to my right and that is about all. Nothing else but open field.



Of interest is the fact that the Professor Martin to whom Mrs Buterbaugh had been told to take a message was a visiting music professor from Scotland, and at that time he was busy arranging choral group singing – something Miss Mills must often have done.

Right: Gardner Murphy, American psychologist and psychical researcher who, with Herbert L. Klemme, made a detailed study of Mrs Coleen Buterbaugh's experience at Nebraska Wesleyan University

Miss Mills died in the office across the hall one day shortly before 9 a.m., having struggled through a bitter wind to the C.C. White Building. Mrs Buterbaugh also arrived there shortly before 9 a.m.

There are obvious resemblances between the cases described here. The most famous, if controversial, is surely the seeming visitation in 1901 by Miss Moberley and Miss Jourdain to the grounds of the Palace of Versailles at the time of Marie-Antoinette (see page 881).

In *Human personality* Frederic Myers, discussing phantoms of the dead, wondered if the influence of certain houses in generating apparitions should be included under the broader heading of retrocognition.

> Manifestations which occur in haunted houses depend, let us say, on something which has taken place a long time ago. In what way do they depend on that past event? Are they a sequel or only a residue? Is there fresh operation going on, or only fresh perception of something already accomplished? Or can we in such a case draw any real distinction between a continued perception of a past action?

The passage quoted highlights a main problem of alleged hauntings. In modern terms, are they psychic tape recordings, available to be played by a human psychic 'tape recorder' brought to the scene, or is the percipient directly 'viewing' the past event or events, or is there evidence of purpose, of a desire from an entity 'on the other side' – to put it vaguely – to deal with unfinished business? The possibility that the past is still 'there' and at times accessible must evidently be seriously considered in any attempt to understand the nature of time.

How does the unconscious mind intuit future events? See page 1734

The impossible dream?

The Society for Psychical Research has always tried to apply the strictest scientific methods to the investigation of paranormal phenomena. But, asks BRIAN INGLIS, is this a mistaken attempt to ingratiate the society with the scientific establishment?

Above: a scientific ESP experiment, of the sort popularised by J.B. Rhine in the United States. Card guessing, however, has proved to be unpopular with those who are best at it – the psychics – for the simple reason that it is boring. This is one of the major problems of psychical research – either the phenomena are spontaneous and unrepeatable or they soon peter out in the clinical atmosphere of the laboratory. Should psychical researchers bravely abandon all attempts to use established scientific methods or should they hold out for the elusive 'proof' that may or may not materialise?

WHEN THE SOCIETY for Psychical Research (SPR) was launched in 1882 its founders – in particular, those who were in the academic world – were confronted by two main problems. The first, as Frederic Myers was later to recall, was to impress scientists with the reality of what he called 'supernormal' phenomena (in order to avoid the more vague other-wordly implications of 'supernatural'). The unexplained phenomena the society intended to study were, Myers was sure, *natural*: even if they were not normal. This meant that they must be discovered and investigated 'by no analysis of tradition, and by no manipulation of metaphysics, but simply by experiment and observation'. The second problem was to find how to experiment, and how to observe, applying 'precisely the same methods of deliberate, dispassionate, exact inquiry which have built up our actual knowledge of the world which we can touch and see' – but applying them to phenomena that did not behave in ways familiar in the world we can touch and see.

Since 1882 scientific methodology has been employed by psychical researchers and it has demonstrated the existence of ESP, PK and other psychic, or 'psi', phenomena. And even the most rock-ribbed sceptics – if they deigned to study the original reports – would feel obliged to take the phenomena more seriously than they do. But few sceptics are inclined to 'waste' their time going back to source.

But here comes the irony. As opinion polls have shown with impressive consistency, the public in Britain and in the USA now accepts the reality of what are currently known as *paranormal* phenomena. It accepts some phenomena more readily than others, admittedly; but it overwhelmingly accepts that there are more things in heaven and earth than common scientific teaching – or even common sense – allows for. Yet, even so, the work of psychical researchers is given little credit. The common image of the SPR is of a bunch of well-intentioned lunatics.

Since the late 1970s the society has been split by a feud that arose out of divided opinions as to whether it should stay in its academic ivory tower, or reach out for more popular support and recognition. This has led to the 'popular' faction splitting off to form their own organisation – the Association for the Scientific Study of Anomalous Phenomena (ASSAP), which was inaugurated in 1981. There can consequently be no doubt that the SPR remains committed, at least for the foreseeable future, to adhere to Myers's formula of 'deliberate, dispassionate, exact inquiry', along traditional academic lines.

Hitting out blindly

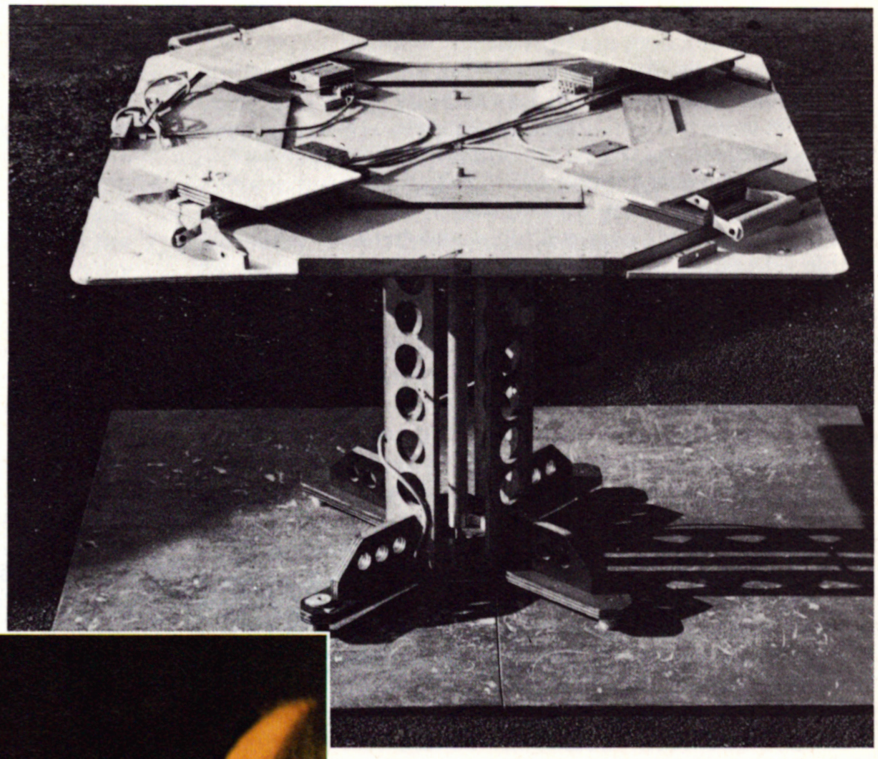
This leaves the society with three problems, the first being – as it has been from its foundation – the continuing existence of academic scepticism about the paranormal; based not on reasonable doubts about the evidence, but upon what can only be described as an unreasoning fear of its implications, which overturn so much of what has been scientific gospel for two centuries. And this has led otherwise rational people to behave in highly unscientific, and sometimes manifestly dishonest, ways. Anybody who thinks that scientists and academics in general have been taking a detached, dispassionate view of psychical research should read the survey by sociologists Harry Collins and Tom Pinch of Bath University, which appeared in *On the margins of science*, edited by Roy Wallis and published in 1978 by the University of Keele.

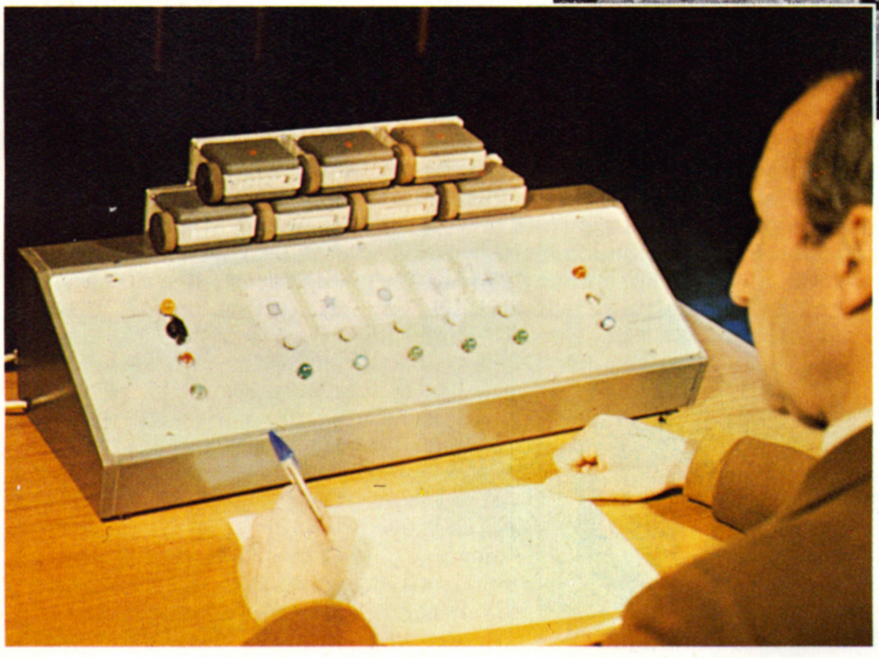
Collins and Pinch were not concerned with the argument about whether or not paranormal phenomena exist. On that issue, they insisted, they were deliberately neutral. What they were investigating was 'the processes involved in the attempt to establish the

existence of a certain class of phenomena'; and this led them to examine the ways that sceptics have used to discredit that attempt, ranging from flat refusal to accept the evidence on a priori grounds, to insinuations of fraud and the 'smearing' of researchers' reputations – often in the crudest and most childish ways.

One result of this is that many psychical researchers have found it extremely difficult to get their work published, except in the society's own *Journal*. The only material that has been considered acceptable for publication elsewhere is accounts that denigrate psychical research.

Psychical researchers have also had to contend with the Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal (CSICOP), set up in the United States, but with an active branch in Britain, which in practice has been concerned only to discredit them. However, CSICOP's reputation





received a devastating blow from one of its founder members in 1980 when it was disclosed that one of CSICOP's trials confirmed, rather than overturned, the positive findings of the French researcher Michel Gauquelin about the traditional 'Mars effect' of astrology. The results, against the member's advice, had been suppressed. This is a disclosure from which CSICOP will surely find it hard to recover.

The psychical researchers' second major problem remains as it was in 1882: how to apply scientifc rules in researching phenomena that do not obey scientific rules – or, indeed, any rules known to Man.

In *My philosophy*, written when he was in his eighties – but still evidently in full possession of his faculties – Sir Oliver Lodge warned that the kind of controls that orthodox science has demanded in psychical research – for example, as exemplified in the extraordinary measures taken to restrain mediums physically in order to prevent fraud – were counter-productive. This was partly because when the aim of the test was to see whether the medium could exert a psychokinetic force, objects would not necessarily move within the test area – but if they did move outside it, critics would jump to the conclusion that the necessary precautions had been neglected.

In any case, Lodge feared sceptics would never accept the evidence 'even if every member of the company had been searched and handcuffed with all their utterances recorded on a gramophone, and all their movements on a revolving drum'. Half a century later, events have confirmed that he was justified in his pessimism.

Herein lies the main danger to the SPR, in its role as a strictly scientific body. Its members' energies are likely to be concentrated on research of a kind that is designed to make a scientific breakthrough. But this, as one of the most respected members of the Parapsychological Association – the international body set up in 1957 – warned in 1980 in a letter he sent out to a number of its members, is going to be dangerous, because it is likely to lead to more attempts to collaborate with the establishment; and this, in turn, will encourage the adoption of scientific assumptions and methods that are not merely irrelevant in parapsychology, but are actually destructive.

This leads to the SPR's third major problem. As a primarily academic body, it is singularly ill-fitted to investigate spontaneous events. A century ago university professors and lecturers had the leisure to pursue such investigations, if they so wished;

Top: the advanced version of the table designed by psychical researcher Colin Brookes-Smith to detect any unconscious muscular activity on the part of sitters at table-tilting sessions. It is seen here with the top removed

Above: the electronic device used by Dr John Beloff of Edinburgh University to test for ESP. The machine randomly lights one of five hidden lamps; the subject then switches in his guess. An alternative experiment involves the subject trying to predict which lamp the machine will select

but few of them have the time to do so today.

And the SPR does not provide any training courses; those few members who are experienced in dealing with, for example, poltergeist cases have no time to investigate new ones, let alone train new investigators. Attempts are now being made to remedy this deficiency; but it may well be that members of ASSAP will be more willing – and better able – to take on such work.

Poltergeist power

Poltergeists also show up another weakness of the attempt to pursue psi along currently accepted scientific lines: they refuse to play the game according to the scientific rules. When Guy Lyon Playfair and Maurice Grosse investigated the Enfield poltergeist (see box), they found – as many a psychical researcher has done before – that they were apparently dealing with a practical joker, who delighted in sabotaging their monitoring equipment; the damage was often done in ingenious ways, as if the poltergeist were determined to demonstrate that it could use PK to cause faults in instruments in ways that could not conceivably be attributed to chance breakdowns.

Playfair has said that the only diabolical thing about his Enfield experience was the train service to and from London; but there are times when psychical researchers can be forgiven for thinking that some demon is deliberately working against them, to spoil their case – the 'ink fish effect', as writer Arthur Koestler has described it, referring to the way that an octopus eludes predators at the last moment by exuding an inky cloud.

Attempts have also been made to fulfil the demands of scientific protocol by imposing ever stricter controls, only to be haunted by another spectre – the 'psi experimenter effect' in which the 'psi' itself eludes controls, confusing the experimental results. Perhaps Sir Oliver Lodge was right to warn fellow members of the SPR that uncontrolled trials must not be despised, because it may be that, under less than strict conditions, 'phenomena occur of such vigour, and of so simple and striking a character, that they overcome suspicion, and constitute their own demonstration'. But this sort of research needs endless patience, and is labour-intensive. This author, for one, cannot see the SPR – at least in its present condition – being willing and able to cope with such a workload. Mutual suspicion and personality clashes will, no doubt, make co-operation between the SPR and ASSAP difficult for a time; but they must surely attempt to reconcile some of their differences if the quest to understand the elusive nature of psi is to be effectively pursued.

The SPR President discusses the expanding role of the society. See page 1758

None so blind...

The investigation of the Enfield poltergeist by author Guy Lyon Playfair and businessman Maurice Grosse – both members of the SPR – has given rise to much bitterness among members. To many, the lengthy investigation, which is described in detail in Guy Lyon Playfair's *This house is haunted* (1980), was both ethical and scrupulously fair. To others, especially some members of the society's council, it seemed plain that the children involved were playing tricks. In fact, both Playfair and Grosse have admitted in print that the children had been discovered to be cheating on occasion, but still maintain that what they were doing was merely *imitating* the real and terrifying phenomena they experienced almost daily for many months. These included the apparently mysterious burning of a jumper (left) and the denting of a teapot that, it was claimed, had been hurled across the room by an invisible agency (above left).

Some of the critics never even visited the disturbed house, provoking Maurice Grosse to remark in a letter to the society's *Journal*: 'I am led to wonder if some members of this Society are prepared to admit the existence of the phenomena the Society was formed to study.'

Post script

Your letters to THE UNEXPLAINED

Dear Sir,
In the spring of 1981 my family were getting ready for a day out. My sister Helen went to sit in the car alone to wait for the rest of us. After about 10 minutes she saw an elderly lady with greyish hair, dressed in a light blue coat and black shoes, about halfway up the avenue walking towards her. My sister said that the lady smiled at her – but as she drew closer she very slowly faded away.

Later my mother showed Helen photographs of her parents and asked Helen if she recognised her 'lady'. Without hesitation she pointed to my mother's Mum, who had died before she was born.

Today my sister says she has seen our grandmother a few times and once heard her call her name. Helen isn't frightened by these experiences. However, I feel a little confused by them – why has my grandmother shown herself to my sister, who never even knew her? Why has she never shown herself to anyone else in our family?
Yours faithfully,
Julie Atkinson Doncaster, South Yorks.

Dear Sir,
I should like to know if any readers could help to explain something that happened to me at Stobo in Peebleshire, Scotland, in the 1960s.

It was early morning; I had gone to bed very tired after a long day and as far as I know I slept soundly. I woke up and – for whatever reason I still cannot tell – went across to the window and saw the hillside overlooking the river Tweed bathed in a soft light (I was looking south so the light must have come from the north). Suddenly a beam of intense light started to sweep the hillside, like a searchlight. As it moved up and down I opened the window so I could see or hear what was going on. But there was no sound, and nothing else could be seen.

As I was on my own I had no witnesses and I felt it was too early to wake anyone else up. Later, I asked various people in the local village if they had seen anything, but no one had as far as I could find out.

Has anyone any idea as to what I saw or any explanations for it? And why should I have woken up and felt compelled to go to the window like that? I think I was watching the light for a full 10 minutes – but I know I was glad to get back to bed! But, curiously, it wasn't really frightening.
Yours faithfully,
C. Smith Galashiels, Scotland

Dear Sir,
My mother has always taken psychic 'knowledge' for granted, although she has the gift only erratically. I remember vividly one early evening about 15 years ago. My father and I were having our tea and to our surprise my mother put on her hat and coat. We asked her where she was going in the middle of tea and she replied that she was going to see her brother John, whom she hadn't seen for a few years because of a quarrel, even though he lived in the same town.

She came back a few hours later, quite serene. Her brother had been thrilled to see her – the old quarrel instantly forgotten – and they had had a long chat, reminiscing about their childhood days. He had been perfectly well and happy.

The next morning at about 7.30 a young policeman came to the door (we didn't have a telephone then) to break the news that this same brother had died quite suddenly during the night. My mother astonished him by saying: 'I know, I knew I had to go and see him to say goodbye.' She bustled around making tea for the policeman, who was in a worse state than she was – it turned out that this was the first time he had broken bad news.

And although not at all psychic myself I seem to have married into a psychic family: my father-in-law at least has often proved himself to have sudden, intense flashes of 'knowledge' about distant people and places.

Once he woke his wife up in the early hours of the morning and said, 'Pray for your mother, she's just died.' Early though it was, he telephoned his in-laws in Ireland; he was so insistent that someone go to his mother-in-law's room that they did so – and found her dead.

On another occasion he woke after having an appalling dream that he was in a car with his 22-year-old nephew, who lived in New York, when it crashed into another car. He insisted that his wife telephone his sister-in-law in New York, but her line was engaged. It was the police telephoning with the news of her son's death.
Yours faithfully,
Sally Anne Ogden Bradford, Yorks.

Dear Sir,
Although I have never had a paranormal experience as an adult, when I was a child I seemed to live in a very psychic world. I remember two incidents in particular.

I was, I suppose, about seven at the time. One night, something had frightened me into wakefulness. Suddenly I could see a white, shimmering 'screen' at the end of my bed. A woman's head appeared against the white background; she had a dead white face with glittering green eyes and bright red hair that was parted in the middle. Her lips were moving so I suppose she was talking to me – but I was deaf with terror. After a few abject seconds I found I could hear her voice (although I can't recall that it was distinctive in any way). What she said was: 'This is not meant for you, the message is (and here she seemed to be consulting an invisible person) not for you . . . but in case it means something to you: you will build a church on a hill. That is the message but it is not easy to understand. You will understand it when you are older. It is what they call symbolic.' She repeated this several times, then quite suddenly vanished, and the 'screen' with her. I was alone in the dark again and when I had stopped shaking I crawled out of bed and woke my parents. Not unnaturally, they told me I'd had a nightmare. To this day I know I must have had a vision – but whose was it meant to be? And what, if anything, did it mean?
Yours faithfully,
Becky Thomas Oxford

Send *your* letters to THE UNEXPLAINED, Orbis House, 20–22 Bedfordbury, London WC2N 4BT

THE WORLD'S MYSTERIOUS PLACES – 34
Horns of consecration, Knossos, Crete